

Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma
University of Oklahoma

A Comic-Book World

Author(s): Stephen E. Tabachnick

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 81, No. 2, Graphic Literature (Mar. - Apr., 2007), pp. 24-28

Published by: [Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40159292>

Accessed: 05/12/2011 19:28

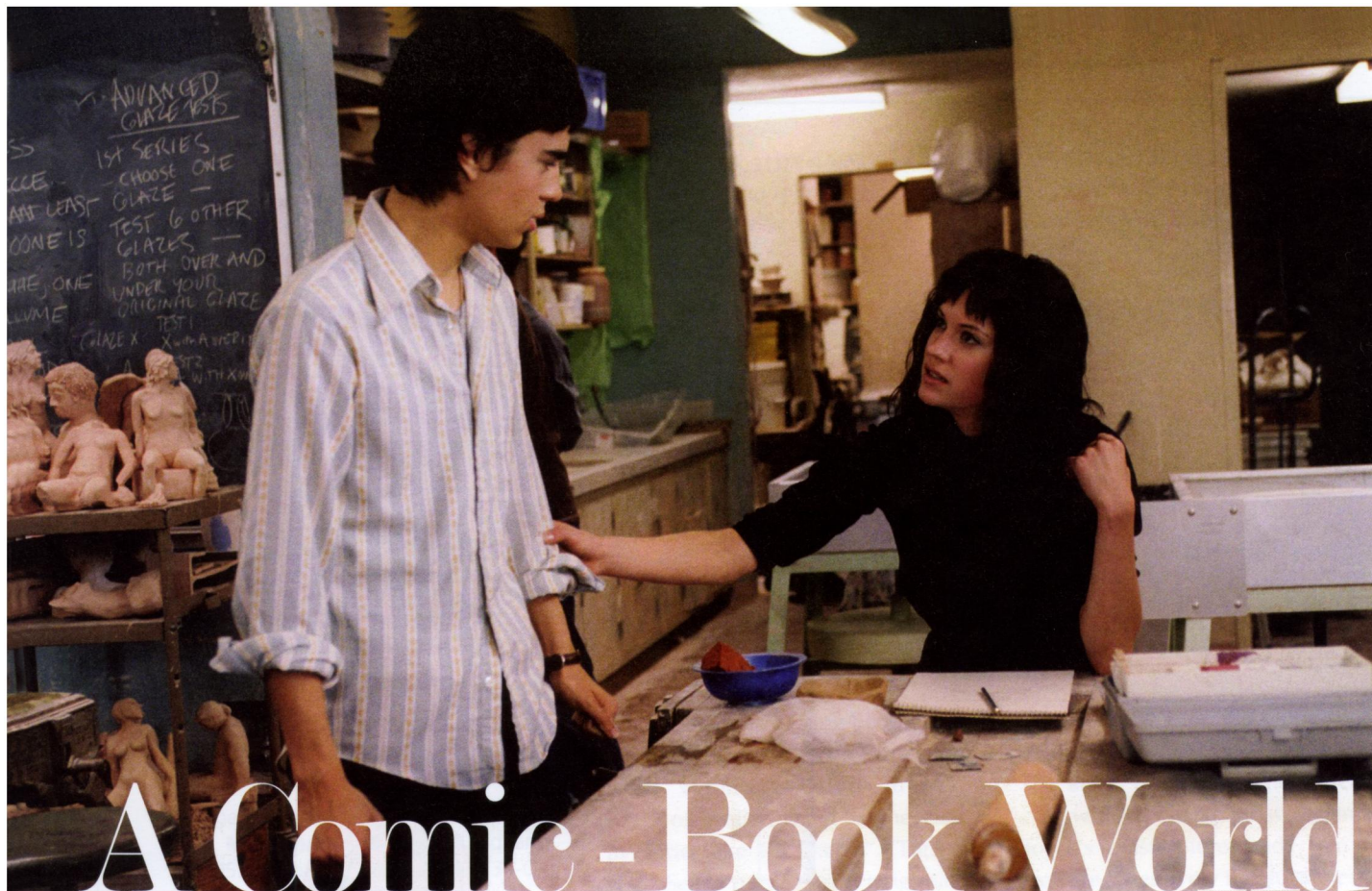
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and University of Oklahoma are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Literature Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



STEPHEN E. TABACHNICK

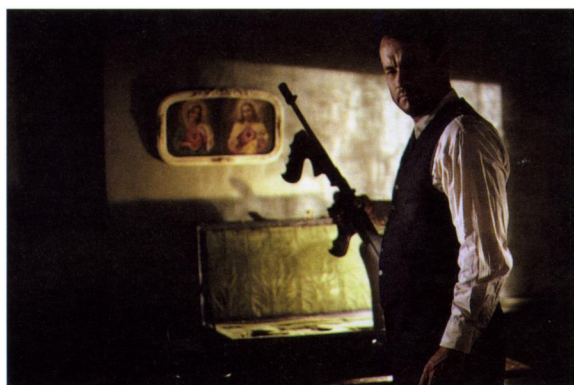
IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, many excellent films have been adapted from equally excellent graphic novels—for instance, Max Collins's *Road to Perdition*, John Wagner and Vince Locke's *A History of Violence*, Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, Frank Miller's *Sin City*, and Daniel Clowes's *Art School Confidential*. Several more films made from graphic novels—including an adaptation of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's retelling of the Greeks' stand against the Persians at Thermopylae, entitled *300*—are also on the way. Yet another graphic novel, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, has won the Pulitzer Prize and was the subject of an exhibition

at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* has achieved cult status on university campuses. Is this recent popularity of the graphic novel in Hollywood, with prize and museum committees, on campuses and, it must be added, in chain bookstores, an instant trend that will soon pass, or does it point to a deeper, more lasting shift in our culture? My fifteen years of teaching this new genre at the university level have provided some hints of an answer to this question. The excitement of newness alone is not very lasting in academe, as elsewhere. But instead of sputtering out like other trendy fireworks,

the graphic novel has been steadily gaining in brightness among audiences both inside and outside the academy. Why? My conclusions to date, which have not and probably will never pass the test of scientific scrutiny, but which seem sensible to me, follow.

First, it seems to me that the graphic novel represents the answer of the book—and people who love to read and make books—to the challenge of the electronic screen, including film, television, the Internet, and video games. Just as the theater's survival was challenged by the rise of film, which led playwrights and theater crews to create new techniques and special

OPPOSITE PAGE Max Minghella as Jerome and Lauren Lee Smith as Beat Girl in Daniel Clowe's *Art School Confidential*. RIGHT Tom Hanks in *Road to Perdition*. BELOW Viggo Mortensen and Ed Harris in *A History of Violence*. These movies are part of the recent crop of screen adaptations of popular graphic novels.



effects, so traditional literature and the book medium in which it exists have found a way to combine their strengths with that of painting, another threatened medium in the electronic age, and to meet the screen on its largely visual ground while retaining the pleasures and advantages of the book. Literary books can offer depth, subtlety, privacy, and intimacy. They also offer an experience controlled by the reader, who can open and close a book at any time, unlike the film or TV viewer, who must follow a film or television show more or less continuously while it is being screened and finds interruptions a disservice. Yet the advantages of the electronic media are many: presentations in

the electronic media are relatively concise and offer speed of apprehension, are relatively easy on the eyes compared to print (except for some badly illuminated computer screens), include sound, and can portray such things as subtle facial expressions and landscapes better than literature can. In the form of video games, they also offer interactivity. Whereas the graphic novel cannot include sound, it provides many of the advantages of both print and electronic media while creating a unique and subtle experience all its own (including strikingly lettered indications of sound). Whether we're dealing with *Watchmen* (known as the *Ulysses* of the graphic novel for its subtlety, sty-

listic variety, philosophical reach, and depth of characterization, and which is much more approachable than Joyce's *Ulysses*) or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*—a stark and harrowing look into what it was like to grow up under the Shah of Iran and then Khomeini—the graphic novel gives us the subtlety and intimacy we get from good literary books while providing the speed of apprehension and the excitingly scrambled, hybrid reading experience we get from watching, say, computer screens that are full of visuals as well as text.

The graphic novel also provides something else, as Marshall McLuhan noted long ago and Scott McCloud has since reiterated: imaginative interactivity. Comics for McCloud constitute a Zen-like “invisible art,” which makes use of the blank spaces, or gutters, that exist between panels and which are the very definition of the unique comics experience. According to McCloud, the reader must fill in these blanks, thus imagining a good deal of the action that takes place in comics. It follows that the mental interactivity of the reader with a graphic novel is much more pronounced and essential than that which occurs when he or she watches a film or high-definition television, in which there are ordinarily no blank spaces for a reader to fill in imaginatively. Thus, the graphic novel routinely manages to provide a powerful interactive experience that has something in common with the interactivity of even that most interactive genre of all, the video game.

It is auspicious, indeed, for those who value books and reading that the book has managed to offer this new, hybrid form of reading that combines visual with verbal rhetoric, for the screen is a very



Natalie Portman as Evey and Hugo Weaving as V in the futuristic thriller *V for Vendetta*, based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd.

powerful competitor—seeming to threaten, at times, the erasure of reading altogether, except perhaps among those people (usually of an older generation) most devoted to it. Even people like myself, who value traditional reading enormously, often find it more appealing to surf the unique blend of text and picture that is the Internet rather than to read a book when suffering a spell of insomnia. Video games are hypnotic, to judge from the scores of young people playing them devotedly in shopping malls. Television is actually addictive, as several studies have shown. Films provide a great Friday-night social experience. Therefore, it is no wonder that, owing to the impact of these various visual media, from year to year students display less and less patience with unillustrated texts, especially long ones; teaching *Moby Dick* or *Paradise Lost* is now a job that takes far more persistence, devotion, and flair to perform suc-

cessfully than was the case in the past. Even with the best teachers, many students cannot now rise to the challenge of reading pure texts. Because of the influence of the electronic screen, that form of reading is slowly being lost, except for a few specialist readers, much like the amateur playing of classical piano, which is now a vanishing art. The new hybrid visual and verbal reading—different from traditional reading but fortunately no less subtle, intelligent, or, in its way, demanding—is rapidly taking its place. That is why, I believe, English departments—rather than art or communications departments—are leading the movement into the teaching and study of the graphic novel. English departments are book-oriented, students are reading pure text much less than they used to, and English departments are trying to find a way to react to this trend in order to ensure their own survival.

It is only honest to admit that even the most motivated readers, whether they are twenty-five or sixty-five, can become physically exhausted when reading pure text in books and staring at those little black marks on white paper for long periods with no visual relief. A long, unillustrated text takes a long time to read, and many people don't quite have the stamina or, more importantly, the taste for that anymore. They just don't want to put in the time, no matter how fascinating the book. They wonder why the writer could not have been more concise. They want a quick read rather than a thick text, not because they are unintelligent or lazy, but simply because they are used to quick electronic perception. Also, despite all of the clichés written about purely textual novels allowing us to imagine characters and places, the truth is that most of us who are not visual artists cannot really visualize what a writer is talking about

when he or she describes a person or physical object; most of us need to see that person or object, and television and films—and graphic novels—allow us to do just that. (The fact that graphic novels are so easily adaptable to other visual media also partially explains why so many talented artists and writers are drawn to the genre these days.)

At the same time, books as a medium are not going away, just as theater survived films. I—and apparently a lot of other people—like to go to bookstores, to hold books, to flip through them, and even to read them while drinking some coffee. There is something special—call it privacy and intimacy—between ourselves and a book that we are not ready to give up. And then there's the fact that books don't black out on us sometimes, as electronic devices do. The graphic novel is the ideal evolution of the book in its attempt to adapt to the new electronic age. I do not mean to imply that text-based books will disappear in the foreseeable future, and even *Watchmen* includes a substantial piece of pure (and brilliantly written) text at the end of each chapter. Nor do I think that English departments are going to stop teaching Melville or Milton in their original, textual versions anytime soon (although there exist terrific graphic-novel adaptations of Eliot's *Waste Land* by Martin Rowson and of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" by Peter Kuper). I think text-based books will exist for a long time to come, but I also think that the balance between purely textual books and graphic novels in terms of numbers of readers will continue to shift in favor of graphic nov-

els. I also predict that the graphic novel will continue to hold its own against the electronic screen and that, if handheld electronic book readers ever prove themselves (as they have so far failed to do), the graphic novel will be an extremely popular form of reading in that format as well.

While all this relates to the technical reason that the graphic novel is becoming prevalent today—namely, a diminution of our ability and desire to read straight text, while we retain our taste for the intimacy of the book and find a combination of text and picture very congenial—there is also one primary cultural reason for the emerging triumph of the graphic novel. It is the reason comics were and still are considered childish by many people. In a child's imagination, the line between the physically possible and the physically impossible is blurred, as it is in comics, where a man can leap tall buildings in a single bound and creatures may metamorphose into other creatures at will. It is very easy for the artist to make the move from the realistic to the fantastic and vice versa in comics; it can be done from one panel to the next or even within one panel. We accept strange transformations in comics; that is perhaps the very essence of the cultural side of the comics experience, running from Lyonel Feininger's *Wee Willie Winkie's World* to Shuster and Siegel's *Superman* and beyond. (That is why we are able to accept Peter Kuper's superb rendering of Kafka's bug/human character, Gregor Samsa, in Kuper's adaptation of "The Metamorphosis," so readily.) In short, I feel that the cultural

reason that serious comics seem to appeal to so many readers today is that we are living in a world in which our reality might instantly prove, and often does prove, to be completely different from what we thought it was.

I happened to be teaching Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, which ends with the Houses of Parliament being blown up, at the University of Oklahoma around the time when the Alfred P. Murrah building was destroyed by a truck bomb about fifteen miles north of my classroom. I remember the class and I remarking that we were now living in a comic-book world. And many of us have been teaching *Watchmen*, which details a catastrophic attack on New York City, before and since 9/11. Again, we are living in a comic-book world—that is, a world that seems to partake of the elastic landscape of a comic book, so ready to explode from mundane realism into a fantastic shape in a second. Moore and Gibbons, who created *Watchmen* as a serial in 1987–88, prove that verbal and visual poets can indeed be seers, as the Romans believed. (And in a particularly brilliant observation based on William Burroughs's "cut-up" collage technique, Moore shamanistically implies in chapter 11 that, for the reader, the panels and gutters of *Watchmen* itself are comparable to the multiple television screens that Veidt watches simultaneously in order to discern the shape of the future, thus turning the reader into a seer as well.)

The world has caught up with Moore and Gibbons and has become as outlandish as the virtual world they describe. Moore's fantastic plot

in *Watchmen*, in particular, and its elastic rendering in comics seem to duplicate our own explosive experience better than any other medium does. No wonder Art Spiegelman found it so possible to render his personal 9/11 experience in a graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, or that Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón have just turned the 9/11 commission report into a graphic novel, *The Illustrated 9/11 Commission Report*. The elasticity of comics makes Jacobson and Colón's adaptation more apt, more suited to our sense of how "unreal" the Twin Towers events were, than the 9/11 report itself. And their adaptation has a diagrammatic quality that makes these fantastic events easier to read about and to understand than might be possible in prose alone. A comic-book-like incident, planes deliberately flying into the Twin Towers, has actually become a comic book. The new comic book makes 9/11 no more or less "real" than it was; it just fits those events naturally, or so it seems.

But the comic-book novel is of our times not only because many of today's events are truly "fantastic"—that is, horrific and unexpected. The elasticity of the comic-book novel also allows it to bring out the fantastic element inherent—but not often noticed—in mundane reality. One of my (and many of my students') favorite graphic novels is Raymond Briggs's *Ethel and Ernest*. Briggs is one of the premier contemporary British illustrated children's book creators. His *Father Christmas* and *The Snowman* have sold many, many copies to parents eager to show and tell these

illustrated stories to their children. *Ethel and Ernest* is a serious, subtle, and gentle biography of his parents and also an account of British history from circa 1930 (when they were married) to 1971, the year in which both died. We watch as Ethel and Ernest move through a life made difficult by the Depression and the Blitz and then made incomprehensible to them by rapid social change after World War II. Despite this seriousness of subject and purpose, however, the characters are rendered in gentle, slightly blurred and dreamy colors. The prose is simple, relatively sparse, and limited to dialogue. The word balloons swell from small, smooth, and regular to jagged, large, and full of emphasis. The world of Ethel and Ernest, rendered nostalgically by their son despite its many difficulties, becomes a fairy-tale landscape inhabited by a noble (if sometimes silly and ignorant) queen and king, although Briggs never directly refers to his parents as such. He has taken his and his parents' mundane and sometimes not-so-mundane reality and brought out all of its inherent magic, thus collapsing the boundary between reality and fantasy. In short, Briggs's book is really a children's book for adults, and his intention seems to be to comfort us, just as children are comforted by a gently told tale.

Whether it deals primarily with fantasy or with reality, the graphic novel is a form suited to the contemporary age because of its appeal to our newly learned sense that reality can very quickly become fantasy, and vice versa, as well as its unique and comforting combination of the

The comic-book novel is of our times not only because many of today's events are truly "fantastic"—that is, horrific and unexpected. The elasticity of the comic-book novel also allows it to bring out the fantastic element inherent—but not often noticed—in mundane reality.

qualities of both book and screen. If we add the enormous popularity of Japanese manga with American preteens, as well as the remembered comfort inherent in the illustrated children's books with which we are all familiar, to the present impetus toward reading sophisticated comics, I contend that the graphic novel will continue to displace (if never completely replace) purely textual writing and that it will eventually become the most popular form of reading. That is because I think that, fortunately or unfortunately, we will watch reality and fantasy morph into each other many, many times in our collective lives in the years to come, not always pleasantly. The good news is that the graphic novel now offers just as many fine creative talents—and as subtle, plastic, and wonderful a reading experience—as any literary genre ever has done.

University of Memphis